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WALTON'S FAVOURITE RIVER

BEING

A PAPER

READ BEFORE

THE GRESHAM ANGLING SOCIETY

BY

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WALTON'S FAVOURITE RIVER.*

WE are a band of brothers—Masonic brothers; some, brothers of the angle. But angling is not our special mission to-day. We are bent on a water frolic, an unofficial survey—a survey of fish, spangled meadows, wooded slopes, towns, villages, factories, mills, banks and braes, landmarks and watermarks, tributary streams; matters geological, geographical, historical and topographical; and anything interesting in connection with Walton's favourite river: and, by arrangement, we are joined *en route* by a party of ladies. Our floating castle is none other than the official steam barge of the Lee Conservancy, well found and well provisioned by our host, Mr. George Corble, clerk to the conservancy, who, in effect, says: "Come with a whoop, come at a call, come with a good will;" and we went accordingly. We are proud, too, of the Masonic rank of some of our party, including representatives from the Grand Lodge of England—Richard Eve, Past Grand Treasurer; J. J. Thomas and J. M. McLeod, Past Grand Standard Bearers; our host, George Corble, who is a Past Provincial Junior Warden of Essex; John Glass, Past Provincial Superintendent of Works, Essex; Fred Renshawe, Past Provincial Senior Deacon, Essex; and others of not lower rank than Past Masters of our respective lodges. This is not a dissertation on angling and anglers, nor a painting of lips of eloquence to describe angling swims, which, for various reasons, change so frequently that no book or article on the latter subject can be held reliable for a long period. The aim is, rather, to give what all intelligent anglers desire and enjoy while pursuing their favourite sport—the *raison d'être* of the river from source to mouth, so that while drinking in, as it were, the joys offered by the locality where they "angle," they may realise all the items in other parts of the stream which share in the production of the picture, and thus elevate the character of the pursuit of angling. And that the adoption of this course would be approved by the author of "The Compleat Angler" respecting his favourite river goes without saying.

We arrive by train at the neat little town of Hertford. Before commencing our voyage from this, the commencement of the navigable part of the river, we take an object-lesson from our host, who is guide, philosopher, and friend. We take an imaginary stand in a balloon, and gaze down on a watershed, whence the congealed dews of heaven are drained over an area of 600 square miles. The watershed may be likened to a crooked trough, the bottom of which is the river Lee, stretching sinuously for about seventy miles, and drawing water from the tributaries and

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slopes on either side, and the tilt of which, from source to mouth, is about 400ft. Our bird's-eye view stretches into four counties—those of Bedford, Hertford, Essex, and Middlesex. For navigable purposes Hertford is the dividing line, the part from the source to Hertford being usually described as the Upper Lee, and from Hertford to the Thames as the Lower Lee. On the upper part we see a few pleasure boats; on the lower part, numerous barges bearing timber, gunpowder (from the works round and about Enfield), malt from Hertford, Ware, Hoddesdon, &c. The navigation is much busier than the uninitiated imagine. The traffic down the Lee does not merely touch the Thames; there is a junction of the Regent's Canal at the lower part, along which barges travel, and thence along the Grand Junction Canal to Birmingham.

We gaze down on this picture map, and see a dozen tributary streams lacing and braiding the slopes, pouring their liquid wealth into the Lee, appearing like so many ribs joining the spine. But only three of these are visible in the first forty miles, and they are just above Hertford, so that the river is comparatively narrow in its upper part. We notice a silver-like sheen in the side streams down as far as Hoddesdon, then a little yellow tinge in a few tributaries, towards the lower reaches a more sombre hue. Why is this? Simply because the bed of the upper stream (with the beds of tributaries) and part of the lower stream is of chalk. The Ash, which joins the left bank near Hoddesdon, has a soil of gravel and chalk; and some of the lower tributaries come over clay and even mud. Fielde's Weir is taken as the dividing line for geological purposes. There the unadulterated chalk-ends; and the purity of the water, and essentially the higher quality of the fish, commence to change. This accounts for the dingy and gloomy shade of the Lee, which has fallen into bad company, as it enters London proper.

The Lee rises in the form of a spring at Leagrave (formerly Leagrove), a grove in which the river is born. This is in Bedfordshire, about three miles north-west of the town now designated Luton. At this point our object-lesson deals with nomenclature.

What's in a name? Sometimes much that is profound and subtle! The public persist in spelling the name of this river Lea—perhaps for a woman's reason, paraphrasing Shakespeare—"they think it so, because they think it so." The official orthography is "Lee," and in that form it appears in deeds relating to property, although the Ordnance Survey Maps favour the common method of spelling the name, "Lea." In Saxon times it was spelt "Lyzan," then "Luy," "Leye," and "Ley." It is not improbable that the Saxon word *leáh*, meaning a meadow, may be responsible for the adoption of the modern spelling, with a dash of romance in it; and this may be helped out by the introduction of the Danish word *lei*—untilled ground—when we remember that the Danes invaded the district, and that probably many remained there and left their mark on the language, as incursionists usually do. In the reign of Edward II. the legal documents spelt the name variously as "Luye," "Leye," and "Ley";

and in the time of Elizabeth it took the form of "Lee," which form is retained in all the documents of the Lee Conservancy Board, and in Acts of Parliament. Wherefore, "Lee" let it remain! And this reminds us that Luton takes its name from this river. It was once known as Luyton; the letter "y" has since dropped out, and the name remains as Luton, meaning the town on the Luy. The stream travels nearly to Hertford, about forty miles, with no accession of consequence other than soakage from the banks. After passing Hatfield, and almost reaching Hertford, it is joined by Bayford Brook on the right bank, and two pretty trout streams (the Mimram and the Beane) on the left. And here we bid adieu to the Upper Lee.

Heave O! "The anchor's weighed." We are nearly thirty miles (by water) from London; our homely barge steams gently on, and we pass Dicker Mill, in sight of some richly-clothed heights, on the left bank, known as Port Hill. History lends enchantment to the place, for here Alfred the Great is said to have fought his last battle with the Danes; and our host produces for our gratification a time-worn, corroded, double-edged sword, and an equally quaint dagger, which had been dredged from the river bed at this part, the belief being that they were weapons of warfare used in the struggles between Saxon and Dane a thousand years ago. We have passed a lock and two bridges, and gazed joyously on the gamboling roach and dace in the transparent stream, when we reach the Balance-engine, which plays an important part in contributing to the comfort of two-fifths of the population of London. On the right bank we see the birthplace of the New River (at Chadwell Springs), or New River Head, and lower down the Amwell Springs, the channel of which river was dug and fashioned in the reign of James I., to supply the inhabitants of North London with water. For garden-like banks, and purity of water, along a course of about seventeen miles' crowfly — and over forty miles in its windings — this New River is unsurpassed. This is one of the most remarkable enterprises of the country. The financial circumstances connected with the formation of the company are somewhat hazy. Various published accounts have stated the original subscription to have been £100 a share. Whether such was actually the case or not, is, in the Scotch sense, "not proven." If it were so, the company was probably re-constructed, and the shares were re-grouped, inasmuch as they are now described as of limited number, and divided into King's Shares and Adventurer's Shares, which former represent a certain number of shares given to the king in acknowledgement of the royal favour of granting a charter (an old form of levying taxes), and the latter investments entered into by subscribers. One of the directors informs me that the old books were all burned in a fire which occurred many years ago, so that the original constitution is a matter of conjecture. The shares dwindled in value till, at one time, they were offered at a very few pounds; they have, owing to increased demand for water by a rapidly-growing population, and by augmented value of estates in which the

funds have been invested, swollen in value so that a King's Share is now worth about £110,000, and an Adventurer's Share £125,000; and each latter share yields a dividend of about £2650 a year. The Balance-engine referred to tests the quantity of water passed from the Lee to the New River. The Chadwell Springs (the source of the New River) soon failed to supply the needs of the growing population of the Metropolis, and an Act of Parliament secured the right to draw from the Lee. The East London Water Company have also secured the privilege of drawing from the Lee; and the two companies are now dependent upon the resources of Walton's favourite stream for about 55,000,000 gallons of water per day, for which the New River Company pays £1500 a year for, say, 22,000,000 gallons daily supply, and the East London Company £2000 for the remainder. Multiplying this daily supply by 365 (as the number of days in the year) we find that the Lee is denuded of 20,075,000,000 gallons a year for drinking purposes. It is fair to state that they have paid large capital sums (the New River £42,000) in connection with improvements at different times; besides, they pay £1000 a year for the purpose of "protection of water." * As three-fourths of the New River supply is from Walton's favourite river, we may term it the Lesser Lee.

We come to Ware Lock, which reveals (close to the left bank) a well-kept garden, doubtless rich in phosphates, owing to the site being that of an old Roman cemetery. Time was when the Romans made a road which cut across (as a ford) the river. Here we take on a new experience, leaving the old river for navigable purposes for awhile to steam along a cut into which enters the Manifold Ditch, which appears "manifold" enough in respect of different impurities conveyed from the sewage works of the town of Hertford. Fish were not visible here, whether owing to the density of the water, or the inability of fish to thrive in it, deponent sayeth not. No scientist is needed to declare this water as impure, although in a trial initiated by the Conservancy, to compel the contributory authorities to purify their sewage, scientific authorities appeared on both sides of the question; some of them averred that impurity would right itself in a course of seven miles in a swift stream. Over £6000 was spent in this trial. We are now approaching the town of Ware, and rejoining the river. On the left bank is a mansion, which was formerly a priory established by Benedictine monks; there is also the Priory Mill. Across the old river, where we rejoin it at the end of the cut, the owner of the grounds keeps a bar of wood across the stream, as an assertion of private rights against intrusion; but the conservators, on the occasion of their annual survey, remove this bar, and proceed up the stream as an act of asserted sovereignty, which fact is annually recorded as evidence to be used in case of future litigation.

And now we come to Ware itself—the old-fashioned

* *Vide* address of Major Lamorock Flower (Sanitary Engineer to the Conservancy) to the members of Parkes' Museum.

town of maltkilns, and all that pertains to the baking of grain and the manufacture of the staple drink of old England. Along the left bank we have a number of demesnes, each of which has a summer-house overhanging the river. The town occupies both banks, and has a cosy looking bridge, which constitutes part of the High-street, leading towards Cambridge. Formerly this was the premier town for malting; it is now put in the background by Wakefield and Burton. Prior to the abolition of the malt tax, there were 150 excisemen constantly engaged in the town; but that was when the malt had to be taxed before being brewed, which secured that beer should be made of malt. Now that the tax is imposed on the hogsheads of beer produced, the constituents of the beer are—well, let us draw the veil, and view the town in other respects! The former name of the town was *Guare*, meaning a weare, or dam, which was constructed on the river, and strongly fortified by the Danes in 894, as a means of protecting their vessels. The wily Alfred is said to have drained the bed of the Lee near this place, thereby stranding the vessels and enabling him to destroy the fort. The great Bed of Ware was once a feature of the town; it is alluded to by Shakespeare in the *Twelfth Night*, in which Sir Toby Belch advises Sir Andrew Aguecheek to write as many lies as would cover a sheet of paper, "although the sheet were big enough for the Bed of Ware." The bed was made to hold twelve persons, was honoured by royal sleepers, and said to have been sold to the late Charles Dickens in 1864. It is no longer at Ware, but is on show at the Rye House, just below; the landlord having purchased it. The fish are sporting freely at this place, unconcerned about Roman roads, Danes and Saxons, malting, or history; nor are they much startled at the approach of even the conservancy barge.

We pass the wharf and crane below Ware Bridge, and try a little pleasant banter with an antique specimen of humanity, whose portly frame of 20st. weight suggests that the breezes from the Lee are not inimical to the development of the human corpus; but, remembering the close proximity of malt and hops, and the product therefrom, we may perhaps endorse local gossip, which avers that the man starts out in the morning as a beer barrel and finishes the day as a barrel of beer. However, this is a detail to be treated lightly. We come to the Tumbling Bay, where fish are abundant, and whence (or thereabouts) commences a stretch of about two miles (more or less) of fishery, rented by the Amwell Magna Angling Association (who have a handsome clubhouse on the river bank), a veritable dreamland for anglers, the smiling woods on the adjacent heights giving a tone to the scene which gladdens the heart of every man who casts a line. Hard by, the river Ash, close to the road which runs to Buntingford, empties its tolerably clear waters into the river Lee. Here we come upon the pretty village of Amwell, which derives its name from Emma's Well. Amwell Springs yield an extra supply to the New River, as before stated.

Scott (a local Quaker poet) is a name of pious memory. Here is a quotation from one of his poems :

> " Amwell ! perpetual be thy stream,
> Nor ere thy springs be less ;
> Thousands who drink them never dream
> Whence flows the boon they bless."

Shortly afterwards we come to the smiling village of Stanstead, its banks decorated by pollard willows. The scene reminds us of many that are peculiar to Dutch villages. Here we approach, near Hoddesdon, the historic Rye House, which has been converted into an hotel, to which beautiful gardens are attached. The contemplative angler, in the pursuit of his gentle art, may muse upon a great historic event, the Rye House plot, which marked the time of Charles II. It was no vulgar attempt at murder and plunder, but an organised political effort to overturn the throne and change the form of government. The merry monarch travelled that way by coach to and from Newmarket races to back the favourite or the field, or whatever was the humour of that roystering monarch. The plot was to overturn a cart on the highway which should obstruct the King's coach, and, when sovereign majesty should come to a halt, some of the conspirators should fire at him from the hedges and escape through the woods and along bye-paths. The plot was revealed; some guilty minds sought to save their own necks by giving evidence against the others. Even members of the aristocracy (Lord Russell, who offered £100,000 for a free pardon), colonels in the army, an ex-sheriff of London, many prominent politicians, merchants, and tradesmen were among the conspirators. By the aid of Jeffries (the butcher judge), some juries, the machinery of the Tower of London, and a scaffold erected in Lincoln's Inn Fields, the incident was ultimately closed. Rumbold was put to death without trial, his limbs were dispersed as a warning to different parts of the kingdom, and his head was stuck on a spike at the top of the spiral staircase in Rye House, from which it fell in recent years. The present proprietor of the hotel will show the Bed of Ware; also some mysterious dungeons to explain the playful methods adopted in days of old to beguile the time of unfortunate captives—dungeons into which sun, moon, and stars have never peeped—dungeons which tradition asserts to reach Nether Hall, a fortified baronial dwelling a mile away.

A bridge was erected some years ago below the Rye House, in the place of one which had stood from the time of Charles, the timber of the old bridge being black as ebony. This is just above Fielde's Weir, which is so named from its being constructed by a family named Fielde, the owners of Rye House. Here the river Stort (on which the malting town of Bishops Stortford stands) enters the Lee. Next comes Dobb's Weir and Tumbling Bay. I have never fished this district, but am tempted to visit the place some day, as it has a most inviting appearance, and hoists a public announcement that anglers may obtain tickets at the neighbouring hostelry—the Fish and Eels—on the bank, which we noticed in passing. Next

comes Carthagena Bay, the reason for which Spanish cognomen appears to be unknown. Here (a spot to crush out all memories of business anxiety) I have spent many days with rod and line, and remember a once familiar angler, the late Charles Bradlaugh, M.P., whose name and angling skill will not be forgotten while so many specimens of his sportive success grace the walls of the hostelry just below, viz., the Crown, at Broxbourne. A change has come over the Crown so far as ownership is concerned. Change is a law of nature, if law and change do not form an anachronism. Laws are immutable, and, in this respect, mutability is immutable. Anglers have for years known a distinctive figure, Mrs. Benningfield, whom probably they will know no more as hostess of the Crown, for, although continuing to reside in the neighbourhood, the lady has sold her interests in the house and gardens, and the fishing arrangements.

King's Weir attracts us, and calls for a halt. We step on to the bank, and find an old friend and well-known angler drinking in the breezes of this healthful place, and in the closing act of struggling with a 3lb. bream. There are several chub flaunting their bright backs before we leave. The pool here is rented by some half-dozen London anglers, who appear to have in hand what is commonly described as "a good thing." Eels are said to abound; chub and bream, too. Let us ponder on the scene! It is very cheery.

Wormley, with its aqueduct, followed by Hollyfield Marsh Bridge, and then Cheshunt, which is supposed to occupy the site of a Roman station on the Roman road—Ermin-street—the manor of which was once held by Cardinal Wolsey. At some short distance inland is Theobalds, owned by Sir Henry Meux, and once the favourite residence of Lord Burleigh, and afterwards of James I., who died in the house. It became the occasional residence of Charles I., and was the place where he received the petition from both Houses of Parliament, in 1642, a short time before he placed himself at the head of the Army. There is a house here in which Richard Cromwell, after resigning the Protectorate, lived in retirement, under the assumed name of Clark, till his death in 1712.

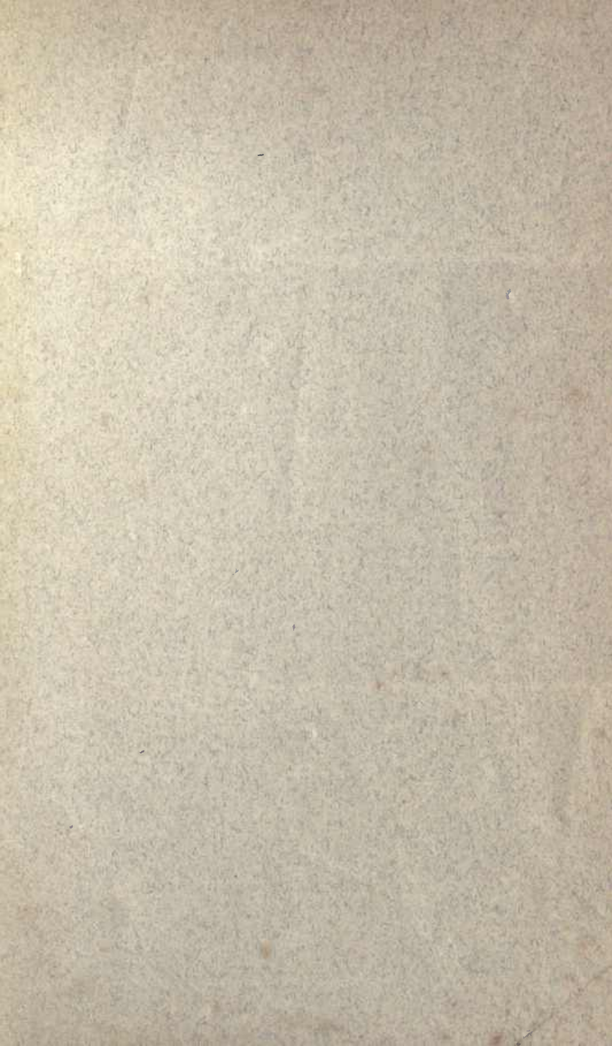
We are approaching Waltham, which will end our pleasant voyage. For quiet sylvan beauty these last few miles are not the least attractive. In the distance we view groves of trees, behind which (as explained by our War Office expert, Mr. Renshawe) are some extensive works for the manufacture of gunpowder, cordite, &c., which stimulate our martial pride in this age of actual wars and rumours of war. We arrive at Waltham, where the barge is domiciled. Waltham is noted for its neighbouring old-time convents, its former line of twenty-seven abbots and numerous monks, and the famous Abbey, which had held its own for centuries. Tradition ascribes the first thoughts of the Reformation to have been hatched in the mind of Henry VIII. when at this place, pursuing his favourite private amusement (please interpret lightly), respecting which latter Fuller, the last Abbot of Waltham, and church historian, sneeringly refers to the monarch to

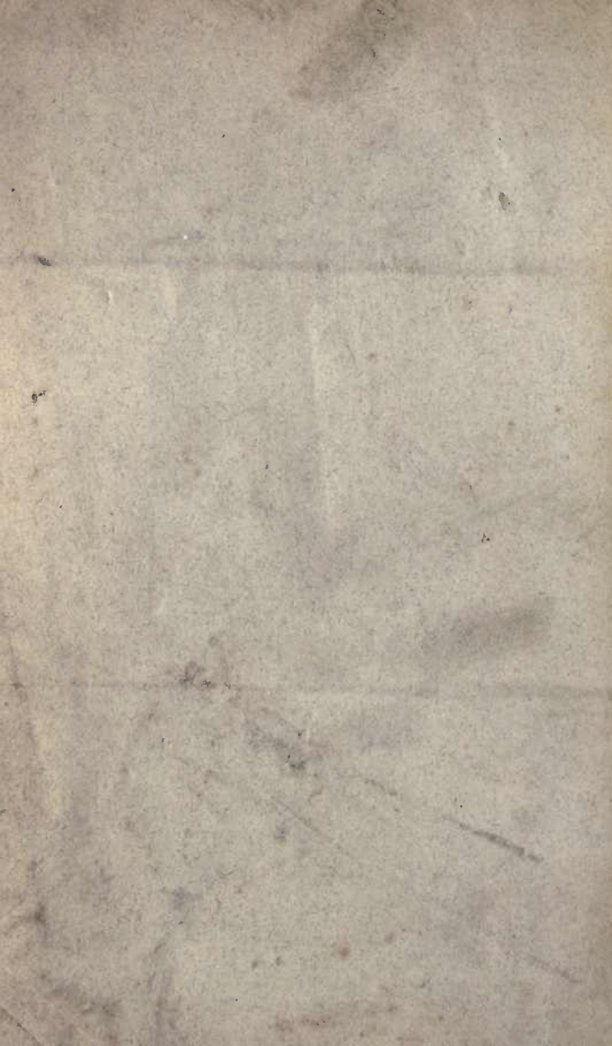
whom he surrendered his estates, saying, "Waltham bells told no tales when the king came there."

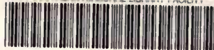
Below this town, most places on the Lee are familiar in your mouths as household words—Rammey Marsh, Newman's Weir, Enfield Lock, Enefelde (so named from its being situated among fields); Tottenham, one of the places where the corpse of Queen Eleanor rested, and in memory of which a cross was erected. The famous cross of wood, covered with lead, as it existed in the time of our great master—Izaak Walton—and at which he at times rested when journeying to the river Lee in pursuit of his favourite pleasure, is described by him as, a "sweet shady arbour, interwoven of woodbine, sweetbriar, jessamine, and myrtle," where he used to refresh himself, and drink "sack, milk, oranges and sugar, which, all put together, make a drink like nectar; indeed, too good for any but us anglers." Some anglers have enlarged upon this practice, and added other sweets. The river runs on by Clapton, Bow, Hackney, and Stratford (the old river), to discharge, *via* Bow Creek, into the Thames near the Isle of Dogs—so named from the dog kennels of Henry VIII. being placed on that small isle, north of the river opposite the King's palace at Greenwich, from which palace the barking of the dogs was sometimes audible. The other entrance to the Thames is at Limehouse, by a new cut made in 1767.

We have traversed a great portion of the stream at those parts which our great master so frequently visited and referred to with so much tenderness. However interesting may be the events connected with past history in relation to this river, there are none which appeal to our hearts with greater force than the fact that Izaak Walton's classic work, "The Compleat Angler," records in charmingly simple language numerous visits to its waters made by that dear old fellow, who trudged many weary miles to its banks before steam engines or steam-boats were known, and when even the means of being helped partly on the road by horse or any kind of vehicle must have been practically non-existent. This is a paper, not on Walton, but on the stream frequented by him. That the prince of anglers, and the greatest of angling authors, should have fished the Lee so persistently, and described it so affectionately in his happy dialogues, has given fame to the stream, and justifies, I submit, the choice of title to this paper—"Walton's Favourite River."

Having dined sumptuously in the saloon of the barge during the day, and partaken of tea in the grounds of our host's residence in Waltham, we are conducted to the engine works of the East London Water Company, and are shown the magnificent engines which pump a thousand gallons of Lee water per minute to High Beach, a height of 400ft. Another hour in the grounds, and we have to share in that "parting" which, *vide* "Juliet," is such sweet sorrow"; and vote our appreciation of the Lee Conservancy and their clerk; "for they are jolly good fellows."



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